

Method: From the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*

Questions of method: concerning the point of departure

In August 1857, Marx began writing the drafts of what was eventually to become *Capital*, now published as the *Grundrisse*. In the opening lines of the manuscript, he states: 'Individuals producing in society – hence socially determined individual production – is, of course, the point of departure'.¹

In the same notebooks, he laid out the sequence that the development of his ideas was to take: '(1) the general, abstract determinants which obtain in more or less all forms of society, but in the above-explained sense. (2) The categories which make up the inner structure of bourgeois society ...'.²

Marx had earlier established the need for the same point of departure together with Engels.³ However, barely a year after penning that first draft, and as a direct consequence of it, he started working on the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, making the commodity his new starting point.⁴ From then onwards, Marx not only re-vindicated this latter beginning of the critique of political economy but, when presenting it in the opening paragraph of *Capital*, also stated its necessity: 'The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails,

1. Marx 1993, p. 83.

2. Marx 1993, p. 108.

3. Marx and Engels 2004, p. 42.

4. Marx 1911, p. 19.

presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities”, its unit being a single commodity. Our investigation must, therefore, begin with the analysis of a commodity’.⁵

Towards the end of his life, Marx once again emphasised the necessity of this starting point: ‘In the first place, I do not start out from “concepts”, hence I do not start from the “concept of value”, and do not have “to divide” these in any way. What I start out from is the simplest social form in which the labour-product is presented in contemporary society, and this is “the commodity”’.⁶

Only the actual argument unfolded in the text of the *Grundrisse* mediates in the shift from the starting point laid out in its first paragraph cited above to the one in the *Contribution*. The text of the *Grundrisse* itself must, therefore, be the place in which to seek the traces left by that transition.

Several Marxist theorists have considered that the change in the point of departure reflects the passage from the process of inquiry to that of presentation, whose different modalities Marx alluded to in *Capital*.⁷ Thus, some scholars have asserted that the development leading from the *Grundrisse* to *Capital* essentially pertains to the presentation.⁸ Furthermore, others have claimed that the dialectical development only belongs to the method of presentation.⁹ Finally, some authors have argued that Marx deliberately tried to conceal the method of inquiry in the published versions of his critique of political economy.¹⁰ The implication of this line of argument is that any attempt to find the key to the method of inquiry would have to focus on the *Grundrisse*, rather than on *Capital*. However, one cannot but wonder whether the change in the point of departure is not, rather, a development of the method of inquiry itself, which only reaches its plenitude in *Capital*. In this case, the key to the question lies in recognising the actual concrete content of that development.

This question of the redefinition of the point of departure places us squarely before another problem. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx begins his study of capitalist economic forms by firstly taking as his object the categories established by political economy. He thus faces the determinations of value by engaging in a critique of the theory of the ‘time-chit’: ‘The point to be examined here is the convertibility of the time-chit. . . . [A] few observations can be made about the delusions on which the time-chit rests, which allow us an insight into the depths of the

5. Marx 1965, p. 35.

6. Marx 2002, p. 241.

7. Marx 1965, p. 19.

8. Rosdolsky 1977, p. 189.

9. Fraser 1997, pp. 97–8; Carchedi 1993, pp. 195–7; Arthur 1993, p. 68.

10. Nicolaus 1993, p. 60; Reichelt 1995, p. 41.

secret which links Proudhon's theory of circulation with his general theory – his theory of the determination of value'.¹¹

One can recognise a similar approach to the real subject matter in his 1844 Paris manuscripts:

We have started out from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws. . . . It is true that we took the concept of *alienated labour* (*alienated life*) from political economy as a result of the movement of *private property*.¹²

In contrast, Marx opens the *Contribution* with his own positive unfolding of the determinations of the commodity. It is precisely this latter development that culminates with the *raison d'être* of the categories of political economy, including the theory of the time-chit. In other words, the critique of political economy no longer proceeds by accompanying the development of the theories of political economy up to the point in which the critical discussion puts it before the need to address the real determination. On the contrary, the critique starts by confronting the real determination itself and follows it in its development to the point where the categories of political economy are revealed as necessary ideological forms of existence of that real determination. This new course of the argument only reaches maturity in *Capital*, especially in the definitive version of the first chapter in the second edition. Marx begins there by unfolding the determinations of the commodity, and concludes the dialectical development contained in that chapter by showing how both classical and vulgar political economy are two necessary forms taken by consciousness held captive by commodity-fetishism.¹³ Once again, we face the question of the nature of the methodological change entailed by the modification in the form of Marx's argument. Just as the result of this change materialises for the first time in the *Contribution*, we are only able to track down the path of its development in the text of the *Grundrisse*.

Representation or reproduction of the concrete

The second way in which the point of departure is transformed puts us before a third methodological issue that is far more intriguing and complex. No reader, much less one well versed in current scientific research-methods, could have failed to notice a peculiar aspect of the aforementioned quotation from the *Notes on Adolph Wagner*: 'In the first place, I do not start out from "concepts" . . .'

11. Marx 1993, p. 136.

12. Marx 1992a, p. 322, 332.

13. Marx 1965, pp. 80–3.

How so? Is not the representation of reality that arises of necessity from the definition of concepts or theoretical categories the only method of developing scientific knowledge? Nowadays, two main forms of human knowledge can be distinguished: intuition, namely immediate non-rational knowledge, and rational conception, namely the representation that starts from concepts and establishes relations among them according to a constructive necessity, that is, a *logic* (more on this below). However, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx opposes a third form of knowledge to those two, which he defines not only as having a rational character, but also as a way of overcoming representation as such: 'The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception [*Vorstellung*].¹⁴ Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought'.¹⁵

The name of each method itself indicates the specific differences between them. To *represent* the concrete means taking its manifestations as they are presented to us at face-value, in order to present them once again as if they were subject to relationships of necessity dictated by the constructive logic of representation itself. Those manifestations can be either those that appear immediately to our eyes, or those that can only be apprehended through the mediation of an analytic process that has managed to abstract the manifestations themselves based on the (more or less) universal features of the concrete in question. However, regardless of the degree of detail achieved by the analysis, the necessity represented always corresponds to the externality of the manifestations that it has put in relation to each other. Penetrating this externality to extract the true necessity at stake is, by definition, alien to its aim.

By contrast, *reproducing* the concrete by means of thought implies that the course taken by the progression of ideas must be the same as that followed by the development of the necessity of the concrete, namely by its determination, in its real actuality. The movement of thought cannot introduce any necessity

14. Nicolaus translates *Vorstellung* as 'conception'. Hegel uses the term *Vorstellung* to refer to thought that stops at the apparent exteriority of its object, precisely in opposition to conceptual thought, which, always via an idealist inversion, engenders the object as a concrete form of realising its concept (see Inwood 1992, pp. 257–9). Putting the question of the forms of knowledge back on its feet, although a conception is the result of the process of representing something, the actual term *representation* expresses directly the very form of the method utilised.

15. Marx 1993, p. 101.

not found in its real object. Thus, it cannot resort to any constructive necessity that establishes a certain point of departure. Consequently, this form of knowledge cannot start out from concepts, but only from the actual concrete.

The existence of two methods of rational thought that are essentially at odds may appear strange. However, this could not have been the case for Marx, who was very familiar with Hegel's work and who had 'skimmed' once more through *The Science of Logic* while writing the *Grundrisse*.¹⁶ In his texts, Hegel persistently contrasts dialectics – which he terms 'speculative thought' in his idealistic inversion – and the method of representation that bases its constructions on formal foundations, that is, on the formal externality of its object.¹⁷ However, his idealistic inversion made him stop at the appearance that the unfolding of logical necessity itself engenders the real. His own theory was thus condemned to being a representation of reality.

Now, beyond principally formal references, the contrast between *representation* and *reproduction* has received scant attention from Marxist theorists working on the issue of method in the *Grundrisse* and its relationship with Hegel's method. In general terms, the specificity of the method developed by Marx is presented as if this were an issue bearing on the form of the constructive necessity, hence of the logic used, and thus as if it were about the difference between two kinds of representation. In some cases, *representation* and *reproduction* are employed as interchangeable terms.¹⁸ On the other hand, even those who recognise that Marx opposes his method to representation tend to replace the term *reproduction* [*Reproduktion*] with that of *reconstruction*.¹⁹ The etymology of this word refers to the joining of elements that are mutually external to each other. In that condition of mutual exteriority, they therefore lack any immanent necessity to establish a relation. The latter can only be established through a necessity stemming from the constructive process itself rather than from its object. As Hegel pointed out – precisely in order to show the limits of representation – maybe this is a case in which 'that which is known in general terms, precisely for being *known*, is not acknowledged'.²⁰

Now, it is clear that since its foundation political economy has known no other method than that of logical representation. Yet, the paragraph quoted above where Marx presents the method of the *reproduction* of the concrete flows directly from this one:

16. Marx and Engels 1983, p. 248.

17. See Hegel 1999, pp. 458–61, pp. 496–8, pp. 624–5; Hegel 1977, pp. 8–9, 18–20, 34–43.

18. Musto 2008, p. 15.

19. Dussel 1985, p. 33, p. 48, p. 52; Smith 1990, p. 20, pp. 34–5, p. 60; Psychopedis 1992, p. 33; Meaney 2002, p. 3; Ilyenkov 1982, p. 136.

20. Hegel 1977, p. 18; translation modified.

The economists of the seventeenth century, e.g., always begin with the living whole, with population, nation, state, several states, etc.; but they always conclude by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc. As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method.²¹

How is it possible for Marx to say that the method used by political economy is the right one, while at the same time defining the outcome of its deployment as *reproduction*, in opposition even to political economy's own self-understanding of the nature of its theories as *representations* of reality?

Furthermore, in the afterword to the second edition of *Capital*, as in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx indicates how the method used by classical political economy leaves room for the element of vulgar political economy to emerge. He also highlights how, on the basis of such a methodological approach, the historical development of political economy reveals it as a form of consciousness doomed to lose all scientific content in order to become the pure apology for the capitalist mode of production as the latter progresses towards its own supersession:

For the development of political economy and of the opposition to which it gives rise keeps pace with the *real* development of the social contradictions and class conflicts inherent in capitalist production. Only when political economy has reached a certain stage of development and has assumed well-established forms . . . does the separation of the element whose notion of the phenomena consists of a mere reflection of them take place, i.e., its vulgar element becomes a special aspect of political economy. . . . Since such works only appear when political economy has reached the end of its scope as a science, they are at the same time the *graveyard* of this science.²²

In utter contrast to this destiny of political economy inherent in its method, Marx defines the historical role of the method of the critique of political economy, 'my dialectical method', by stating: 'In its rational form it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less

21. Marx 1993, pp. 100–1.

22. Marx 1971, pp. 921–2.

than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary'.²³

On the other hand, the same point made by Marx about the two historical stages followed by classical political economy – from its seventeenth-century beginnings to its maturity with the works of Smith and Ricardo – makes it clear that its naturalisation of capitalist relations does not derive, *pace* Rosdolsky,²⁴ from the fact that it confines its procedure to the analytical stage without subsequently returning to the more concrete forms.

Once we disregard any possibility of incoherence on Marx's part, the only possible answer is that, while both methods (logical representation and the ideal reproduction of the concrete) go through the two-fold path of analysis and synthesis, each form of scientific knowledge undertakes each of these two steps in different concrete forms. These concrete forms need to be so different from each other that their respective outcomes are, in one case, the *representation* of the concrete in thought and, in the other, the *reproduction* of the concrete in thought. What is more, their difference must be so profound that while the historical development of the former turns it into 'the graveyard of science' and the apologetic for capitalist social relations, the other becomes the scientific form of consciousness which buries those social relations. The divergence in historical trajectories does not arise from taking a different real content as an object of inquiry, but from the very form in which the same content is appropriated in thought.

It is thus clear that Marx's methodological remarks at the start of the *Grundrisse* do not constitute an unproblematic synthesis that could straightforwardly resolve the issue of the specificity of the method of the critique of political economy. On the contrary, they raise more questions than answers. The 1857 introduction provides no more than a concise rendition of certain aspects of the dialectical method whose content must be further developed in a critical fashion. In this chapter, we shall therefore firstly elaborate on the question of the difference in form between the representation and the reproduction of the concrete in thought. On this basis, we shall subsequently discuss the other two methodological evolutions on which we commented above that lead from the *Grundrisse* to the *Contribution* and *Capital*.

23. Marx 1973, p. 20.

24. Rosdolsky 1977, p. 567.

The methods of scientific knowledge

Both the representation and the reproduction of the concrete are constructions of an ideal nature, in other words, constructions of thought. As Marx points out, both start by facing a real concrete. Moreover, both aim to appropriate in thought the determinations of the concrete in question with a view to intervene in its development, that is, to act upon it. Both intend to give such an action the character of an action that is objectively aware of its own cause. In this sense, they depart from the premise of not accepting any necessary content other than that found in its object, nor forcing on its object any necessity springing from the subjectivity of the researcher. In turn, this means that they begin by facing the real concrete in order to go beyond the appearance that it presents to immediate cognition in search of its true determination. In other words, both methodological approaches begin with the *analysis* of the real concrete. In the following sections, we explore in more detail each form of the process of cognition in order to bring out the fundamental differences that set the two scientific methods apart.

Logical representation

Let us start by examining the way in which the analysis characteristic of logical representation conceives the foundations of its own objectivity. The latter is seen as ruling out all possibility that an existing concrete may carry within itself a causal necessity other than the immediate manifestation of its very form. On this basis, there is no other possible expression of the general nature of causality other than the greater or lesser regularity of its manifestations. It follows that the analysis that leads from the immediate concrete to the discovery of the most simple and general determination must consist in the identification of recurring attributes.²⁶ Therefore, the necessity of its simplest concepts and categories is founded on the repeated presence of an attribute in the original concrete. The qualitative development that determines the general, specific and singular is represented indistinctly from, if not confused with, the merely quantitative development of the universal, particular and individual. This also implies that those simpler concepts are obtained by assuming a *purely ideal* concrete bereft of non-recurring real attributes. They therefore cannot correspond to any *actually existing* concrete simpler than that with which the analysis began.

26 . Hempel 1965, pp. 231, pp. 253–4.

Once the degree of repetition considered sufficient for the abstraction of those general concepts from the original concrete has been achieved, the process must reverse its direction. In this second phase, the representation of the concrete arises as a unity in which the more and less general concepts obtained in the analytical phase are placed in a necessary relation to each other. Thus, on the basis of the simplest necessary element identified in the first phase, progress is subsequently made by re-incorporating the attributes formerly excluded as accidental, or, in other words, by removing 'simplifying assumptions'. However, given that the analysis began by conceiving each concrete as devoid of any causal necessity that transcends the objectivity of its immediate affirmation, the concepts arising from it cannot but preserve this condition. As a result, they must be placed in relation to each other by recourse to a *constructive necessity* that is inevitably external to them and that simultaneously preserves the mutual externality of those concepts in the represented unity. *Logic* is thus this constructive necessity which represents all objective connection as if it were an external relationship between concepts. It gives coherence to the reciprocal externality of all concepts and relationships involved in representation based on its own necessarily tautological nature. Hence the tautological nature of the synthesis itself.²⁷

True, most Marxist authors referred to earlier do not necessarily subscribe to this manner of proceeding.²⁸ They oppose to it what they define as a dialectical approach. However, they rarely explicitly state the specific form that the analysis should take within the dialectical investigation. Thus, it is stated that the key resides in distinguishing between necessary and contingent moments,²⁹ between empirical and substantive abstractions,³⁰ or between general and determinate abstractions.³¹ These contributions recognise that abstract forms must be sought within more concrete ones. However, they usually do not explain either the way in which this search should be made, or the basis on which those differences could be established. In the cases in which the form of analysis is made explicit, this is sometimes seen as entailing the repetition of common attributes (thus not differing from representational analysis).³² Alternatively, other scholars have characterised the analytical process in a Cartesian fashion, namely, as the decomposition of the complex totality into mutually external simple elements.³³ Finally, some authors have argued that elemental concepts should be defined in terms of the aim or finality of the theoretical construction, in other words, that

27. Carnap 1959, p. 143, p. 145.

28. An obvious exception is that of analytical Marxists. See Burns 2000, pp. 86–98.

29. Reuten 1988, p. 143.

30. Bonefeld 1992, pp. 104–5.

31. Fraser 1997, p. 93.

32. Dussel 1985, p. 33.

33. Murray 1988, pp. 121–9; Dussel 1985, p. 51.

they should be posited by the criterion of the researcher *prior to* the scientific development itself.³⁴

Given that the concepts arising from these modes of analysis are bereft of a necessity which would drive them to self-transcendence, the relationship between them is represented by a constructive necessity defined as a *dialectical logic*. In some cases, it is stated that a concept should be logically derived from another until a system is structured, although the concrete form in which this process is to take place is not actually explained.³⁵ In other cases, the derivation is founded in a parallel with the development of Hegel's *Logic*,³⁶ or in the doubling of abstract notions,³⁷ or in the unfolding of determined categories as the condition of existence of determinant ones.³⁸ Other approaches see dialectical logic as involving the attempt to place the parts in a relationship to the whole, which implies relapsing into a process of synthesis in which the general and specific are reduced to the mutually external nature of the universal and particular.³⁹ In all cases, the inevitable result is a concrete in thought whose nature as the outcome of a purely ideal intertwining of concepts is beyond question, hence its condition as a systematic conceptual representation in opposition to a reproduction.⁴⁰

Other Marxist conceptions posit that the dialectical-logical development should be driven forward by the tendencies for determinate actions of social agents that are intrinsic to the social form referred to by each theoretical category,⁴¹ or by the practical insufficiency of each form achieved.⁴² However, these approaches do not explain how to solve the rift that these procedures generate in the actual consistency of the conceptual development. On the one hand, this implies following a sequence that responds to a constructive necessity, and on the other, a sequence that follows the movement of the real concrete itself.⁴³

These ideas have provided the grounds for the claim that developments based on dialectical logic are not tautological in nature.⁴⁴ However, the very same developments undertaken with the purpose of structuring a dialectical logic capable of bringing coherence to the representation of the concrete as a unity of opposites have concluded that such logic necessarily requires each of them to

34. Mattick 1993, p. 122; Smith 1990, pp. 34, 68; Psychopedis 1992, p. 34.

35. Foley 1986, pp. 3–11.

36. Uchida 1988; Arthur 1993, p. 73; Smith 1990; Murray 1988, pp. 161, 184, 231.

37. Reuten 1988, p. 52.

38. Arthur 1993, p. 67; Carchedi 1987, p. 75.

39. Dussel 1985, p. 52.

40. Marx 2002, p. 244.

41. Smith 1993, pp. 19–20.

42. Mattick 1993, p. 128.

43. Marx 2005, pp. 120–4.

44. Arthur 1993, p. 67.

be defined as simple immediate affirmations.⁴⁵ This is not a circumstantial fact. If each pole were accorded the capacity to affirm through self-negation, it would then have to be recognised as the bearer of a necessity whose realisation would set it into *self*-movement independently of its opposite. In this case, one would have to accept that the introduction of a constructive necessity representing all movement as a relationship between opposites would be redundant. What is more, inasmuch as this logical movement would collide with the real one of affirmation through self-negation, it would lead the process of cognition towards incoherence. Hence the external and tautological nature underlying, in the last instance, all conceptual relationships representing the real movement by means of a dialectical logic.⁴⁶

Let us now see how the application of this method appears in the very point of departure of political economy. For example, Adam Smith uses it to ground the simplest determination on which to develop his theory of the organisation of social life. 'The principle which gives occasion to the division of labour', he argues, stems from 'a certain propensity in human nature . . . to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another' whose discovery lies in observing that 'it is common to all men, and to be found in no other race of animals'.⁴⁷

This same form of analysis appears when Smith has to ground the general determination which dictates that the labour-content of exchange-value is not directly expressed as such, but rather as quantities of another commodity, and, more concretely, as price. The entire foundation is reduced to the assertion that the first expression is 'more frequently' observed and 'is more natural, therefore' than the comparison 'with labour', while at the same time, 'every particular commodity is more frequently exchanged for money than for any other commodity'.⁴⁸

Let us note, in passing, how the recurrence of the most immediate appearance allows this mode of analysis to present it in an inverted form as the true general determination. This is what Hegel had in mind when he said that:

[S]ince in this procedure the ground is derived from the phenomenon and its determinations are based on it, the phenomenon certainly flows quite

45. Joja 1969, pp. 111–13, 157; Lefebvre 1984, p. 154.

46. In his defence of dialectical logic, Ilyenkov (1982) falls into circular reasoning by arguing that the identification of the relevant aspect to be abstracted by analysis 'presupposes the comprehension' of its specific role and place in the whole (Ilyenkov 1982, p. 103). In turn, he conceives the process of synthesis as the 'combination' (p. 37) of a pair of the abstracted concepts, which are complementary as each of them presents an aspect lacking in the other (pp. 88–92). Consequently, he can only ground the capacity to identify which pair of opposed aspects is determining in each case by asserting that it 'is an axiom of dialectics' (p. 138).

47. Smith 1852, p. 6.

48. Smith 1852, p. 13.

smoothly and with a favourable wind from its ground... The exposition begins with grounds which are placed in mid-air as principles and primary concepts;... Therefore he who aims to penetrate such sciences must begin by instilling his mind with these grounds, a distasteful business for reason because it is asked to treat what is groundless as a valid foundation.⁴⁹

It is precisely by virtue of the way in which logical representation opens the door to the inversion of immediate appearances into the content of the determination that political economy exhausts its role as science to engender its apologetic form as vulgar economics.

As for the return to the concrete by lifting simplifying assumptions, both Adam Smith and David Ricardo offer a particularly illustrative example in the aesthetically-naturalising form taken by their depiction of the transition from the 'early and rude state of society' to 'the accumulation of stock'. This transition is reduced to the substitution of the assumption that 'capital' belongs to the labourer for the more realistic one that 'all the implements necessary to kill the beaver and deer might belong to one class of men, and the labour employed in their destruction might be furnished by another class'.⁵⁰

Dialectical reproduction: from '*Capital*' to the '*Grundrisse*'

Already before the *Grundrisse*, Marx had exposed the ultimate result of the analysis based on the construction of an abstract representation of the concrete by forcefully stripping it of its attributes: 'In consequence of thus abstracting all the so-called accidents, animate or inanimate, men or things, we are right in saying that in the final abstraction we have as substance the logical categories'.⁵¹

Even earlier, Marx had exposed the inversion inherent in all representation by which logic appears as the necessity that sets the concrete into motion, with the latter in turn conceived of under the appearance of being inert and therefore incapable of self-movement. Initially, he had limited himself to making a case for replacing a constructive necessity of a general nature with one that corresponded to the specificity of its concrete object: 'the proper logic of the proper object'.⁵² However, later he advanced in the development of a scientific method capable of overcoming the externality of the constructive necessity *vis-à-vis* the real necessity of its object, making it clear that this externality was inherent in logic itself, no matter how concrete one might wish to make it: 'Logic is the

49. Hegel 1999, pp. 459–60.

50. Ricardo 1821, p. 17.

51. Marx 2005, p. 115.

52. Marx 1982, p. 92.

currency of the mind, the speculative *thought-value* of man and of nature, their essence which has become completely indifferent to all real determinateness and hence unreal, *alienated thought*, and therefore thought which abstracts from nature and from real man: *abstract thought*'.⁵³

It might seem that, in the same text on the method in the *Grundrisse*, Marx is leaving room for a form of analysis guided by the search for a recurring attribute: 'As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone'.⁵⁴

However, at stake in this passage is the condition of universal existence of the concrete that allows its abstraction to be thought up. In turn, the representation that starts out from an analysis based on repetition is the most immediate form of thought. Yet, precisely because of this it is unable to transcend the appearances of repetition itself. For example, freedom and equality can only be conceived of as abstract categories when they have become universal forms of the general social relation. However, despite this recurring presence, the latter says nothing about their content or, in other words, of their necessity: '[T]he stale argumentation of the degenerate economics of most recent times . . . *which demonstrates* that economic relations everywhere express *the same* simple determinants, and hence that they everywhere express the equality and freedom of the simple exchange of exchange values; this point entirely reduces itself to an infantile abstraction'.⁵⁵

Now, the specific aim of this paper is to address the issue of method in the *Grundrisse*. However, let us recall the methodological observation made by Marx in the latter book itself: 'Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known'.⁵⁶

Thus, *pace* Mepham, let us thus begin by taking as the concrete object of our study of the dialectical method in the *Grundrisse* the fully-developed shape that it would acquire in *Capital*.⁵⁷

The analysis pertaining to the dialectical method begins by confronting a determinate concrete. However, far from seeking out others alike to see what

53. Marx 1992a, p. 383.

54. Marx 1993, p. 104.

55. Marx 1993, p. 249.

56. Marx 1993, p. 105.

57. Mepham also resorts to this same analogy to discuss the evolution of Marx's method from the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*, but to argue against its use as an appropriate way of approaching the question. In an Althusserian fashion, he thus postulates a 'radical discontinuity' between those two texts. See Mepham 1989, pp. 232–3.

recurs in their manifestations, it attempts to uncover the necessity whose immediate self-realisation has taken the form of (hence determined) the original concrete. In other words, dialectical analysis penetrates the real concrete in search of the necessity that makes it what it is. It does so by separating the necessity in question in what it has as a pure potentiality, from its already realised result. The analysis thus separates the content of necessity (and hence, abstract existence) from its realised form (hence, concrete existence).⁵⁸ Once this first step has been made, the process must advance step-by-step towards the discovery of an ever simpler potential necessity. This is done by taking the content of the recently-discovered necessity as a concrete form in which its own necessity-content has in turn self-realised. In other words, the analysis moves forward by taking the abstract form uncovered in its determination as a concrete form itself.

In *Capital*, Marx makes evident how the analysis begins by facing the specific determination of the commodity as a social relation under the concrete form in which this determination presents itself, that is to say, under the form of exchange-value. He points out how, at first glance, it seems impossible that this concrete form is able to carry within itself a different content from its outward appearance.⁵⁹ However, this immediate appearance of exchange-value as an abstract quantitative relation dissolves as soon as it is analysed. In asking about the necessity for the existence of the quantitative relationship of equality between different use-values, it becomes clear that the latter immediately entails the existence of a common content. Let us note that what is at stake, here, is not the search for a recurring attribute, but the discovery of the source that allows each one of these two qualitatively different use-values indifferently to take the place of the other. Thus, such content cannot arise from the exchange-relation but, instead, must find expression within it.⁶⁰ The analysis continues by facing that common substance crystallised in the commodity in order to separate its realised form from its necessity as pure potentiality yet to be realised, that is to say, as the very action capable of engendering this common substance. At this point, the analysis faces the potentiality of human productive action, in other words, of labour, as the source of the commodity's exchangeability. Still, it discovers this potentiality only when taking a further step that abstracts labour from its concrete forms of realisation. This means it discovers that the necessity of value so far has the following as its simplest content: '[H]uman labour in the abstract. . . . [T]he same unsubstantial reality in each, a mere congelation of

58. '... all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided' (Marx 1966a, p. 817).

59. Marx 1965, p. 36.

60. Marx 1965, p. 37.

homogeneous human labour, of labour-power expended without regard to the mode of its expenditure'.⁶¹

Now, the analysis cannot stop there. It has discovered abstract labour as the realised action that endows the commodity with value. However, inasmuch as abstract labour is itself a potentiality that has been realised, it appears to be devoid of all qualities except, precisely, its qualitative indifference. Thus, the analysis must search for the content of the necessity of abstract labour that produces commodities, which it finds in the material nature of abstract labour: 'Productive activity, if we leave out of sight its special form, viz., the useful character of the labour, is nothing but the expenditure of human labour-power. . . . [A] productive expenditure of human brains, nerves, and muscles . . .'.⁶²

The analysis must now answer the following question: how can this material expenditure of human body, a condition of human life in general, be the determinant for the social specificity of the commodity? It thus continues by separating this materiality as an individual expenditure of labour-power from its necessity as an active organ of the process of social metabolism. Accordingly, the analysis discovers that this material expenditure has as its specific qualitative content the way in which the individual carrying it out rules his/her participation in the organisation of social labour. It is a productive expenditure of a human corporeality in general, which is made for others, whose concrete realisation is fully controlled by the will of the individual performing it. The commodity-producer controls by means of his or her own individual will how and what to produce for other members of society. Thus he or she consciously controls, free from personal dependence, the exercise of his or her individual capacity to perform social labour. At the same time, however, his or her consciousness is excluded from the organisation of the labour carried out by any other individual commodity-producer. There is no alien individual will, nor any collective will, organising the expenditure of the individual labour-power applied to the production of commodities. The labour that produces commodities is thus social labour privately undertaken by mutually independent producers: 'Only such products can become commodities with regard to each other, as result from different kinds of labour, each kind being carried on independently and for the account of private individuals'.⁶³

61. Marx 1965, p. 38.

62. Marx 1965, p. 44.

63. Marx 1965, p. 42. This translation obscures Marx's direct reference to 'mutually independent private labours' [*voneinander unabhängiger Privatarbeiten*] as the determinant of commodities. Nevertheless, the translations by E. and C. Paul and the one by Fowkes directly omit the word 'private'. Such an omission at this crucial point has prevented us from using them for our quotations. It is noteworthy how Marxist political economy has displaced the private form with which social labour is performed in capitalism as the specific determinant of the commodity-form. From this perspective, two main

The analysis that gives way to the reproduction of the concrete by means of thought does not end because the researcher arbitrarily decides to cease identifying recurring features in order to produce an even more abstract concept. Instead, it concludes, because when searching for the necessity of the recently-discovered content, it becomes plain that it can only be found by accompanying the self-realisation of that content in its necessary concrete form. Let us return to the case of the value-content of the commodity. Analysis has allowed us to discover that the commodity has value, that is to say, the attribute of exchangeability, because privately and independently performed socially necessary abstract labour has been materialised in it. This places us squarely in front of another question: why is it that this private and independent realisation of the material expenditure of human labour-power in general endows its product with the social attribute of value? The analysis, however, is unable to answer this question.⁶⁴

In fact, if we examine the manner in which Marx presents how this point has been reached, the limit of the analysis appears as emerging from a change in its modality. Up to this point, it involved the search of the necessity of the content. Conversely, in its latest step, Marx presents it as if it were unable to penetrate through the exteriority of a recurring attribute, namely, that of being the product of private and independent labour. In other words, the analysis appears as having to assume the modality characteristic of the method of representation.

The question about the necessity of value now faces us in such a way that it can only be answered by accompanying the realisation of the specific potentiality that the analysis has discovered as an immanent actuality in the commodity. The commodity's exchangeability, posited by the materialisation of abstract socially necessary labour carried out in a private and independent manner, confronts us in the manner of a content that must account for its own necessity by realising it. Hence, the development must follow the movement of value in its necessary concrete form of expression as exchange-value.⁶⁵

Marx thus successively unfolds the forms of the exchange-relation, asking each one in turn which content it progressively reveals. Let us note that this development does not imply a simpler form engendering a more concrete one. Instead, the unfolding of the former's necessity evidences the necessity of the

strands can be identified. The first one, principally based on the work of Sraffa, maintains that value is determined by the immediate material unity between social production and consumption, thus replacing private labour with one that is directly social as the foundation of the commodity-form. The second, which stems mainly from Rubin, holds that the specificity of commodity-producing labour is its 'abstract' character, which is defined in opposition to the materiality of abstract labour pointed out by Marx as a simple productive expenditure of the human body.

64. Marx 1965, p. 47.

65. Marx 1965, pp. 47–8.

existence of the latter. The starting point from which to follow the development of the necessity of value to manifest in the concrete form of exchange-value is the simplest expression of the latter, namely, the exchange-relation between two different commodities: 'The whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in this elementary form. Its analysis, therefore, is our real difficulty'.⁶⁶

Already in this simplest form, it is clear that the value of a commodity, i.e. the socially-necessary abstract labour materialised in it in a private and independent form, does not only manifest itself in a purely relative manner. In addition, it does so necessarily through the use-value of another commodity that acts as its equivalent.⁶⁷ Above all, this first step in the process of unfolding of the value-content of the commodity in its necessary form as an exchange-value makes evident the same determinations already uncovered by the analysis:

We see, then, all that our analysis of the value of commodities has already told us, is told us by the linen itself, so soon as it comes into communication with another commodity, the coat. Only it betrays its thoughts in that language with which alone it is familiar, the language of commodities. In order to tell us that its own value is created by labour in its abstract character of human labour, it says that the coat, in so far as it is worth as much as the linen, and therefore is value, consists of the same labour as the linen.⁶⁸

Thus it might appear as if all that is at stake, now, is to present what the analysis has already discovered. Yet, we immediately discover that, in appropriating the 'language of commodities', that is, in reproducing in thought the commodity's immanent movement, certain determinations that the analysis was unable to discover now come to the fore. In first instance, the commodity affirms itself as the real subject whose development must be followed in thought: 'It therefore follows that the simple form of value of the commodity is at the same time the simple form of value of the product of labour, and also that the development of the commodity-form coincides with the development of the value-form'.⁶⁹

The analysis could not account for the necessity of the commodity as its starting point. Matters are different as soon as thought begins to reproduce the

66. Marx 1965, p. 48. With this statement, Marx brings out the specific difference between the representation and reproduction of the concrete. In the former, the key to the discovery of the law of determination lies in formal generalisation. By contrast, in the latter the key resides in the simplest expression of the content. See also Hegel 1999, p. 280.

67. Marx 1965, p. 19.

68. Marx 1965, p. 52.

69. Marx 1990a, p. 67. We were forced to resort to this edition of *Capital* for this particular quotation because the edition we are normally using introduces here an alleged reference to the historical development of commodities that is completely absent from the German original.

movement of a commodity in its social relationship with another. In this second phase, the commodity shows itself as the necessary point of departure for the discovery of the concrete determinations of the specific form in which the materiality of the process of social metabolism in the capitalist mode of production is organised. The exposition here reflects the actual course of the research, which moves along a path alien to that of any analysis.

In this ideal reproduction of the concrete, the research moves forward and uncovers the necessity according to which the general materiality of the labour represented in the value of the commodity appears in the very form of the exchange-relation.⁷⁰ At the same time, it reveals that the apparent absence of all unity in the materiality of the labour represented by value is the indirect form in which the general unity of the material process of social labour is realised.⁷¹ Subsequently, it makes evident that this unity needs to acquire an expression that can synthesise it in the very movement of its own organisation, in other words, in the very movement of commodities.⁷² In effect, in the exchange-relation, the corporeal materiality of any concrete form of the product of social labour mutates into that of the general equivalent as a synthetic expression of the indirect unity of social labour. This reveals that the unity of social labour is specifically established in capitalism on the basis of the general materiality of human labour, namely of the simple productive expenditure of the human body:

The substance linen becomes the visible incarnation, the social chrysalis state of every kind of human labour. . . . In this manner the labour realised in the values of commodities is presented not only under its negative aspect, under which abstraction is made from every concrete form and useful property of actual work, but its own positive nature is made to reveal itself expressly. The general value form is the reduction of all kinds of actual labour to their common character of being human labour generally, of being the expenditure of human labour-power.⁷³

We can now see that the reproduction of the necessity of the commodity in its realisation not only progresses by discovering determinations that the analysis was impotent to bring out. At the same time, it exposes the actual appearances to which it would have stuck had the research been interrupted at that stage. In the process of analysis, the unity of social labour expressed in the exchangeability of the commodity may appear, at first, as something determined by the absence of all material content in abstract labour. Only in a second step does the

70. Marx 1965, p. 63.

71. Ibid.

72. Marx 1965, p. 66.

73. Marx 1965, p. 67.

analysis inevitably face this materiality. By contrast, in the development of the value-form taken by the determination of the indirect unity of social labour, it becomes clear that such unity is predicated on the real material quality of abstract labour as a productive expenditure of human corporeality. This evidence comes up already in the simplest expression of value. In effect, the concrete labour that produced the equivalent can express the abstract labour that produced the commodity occupying the relative pole, only because its materiality as a simple expenditure of human labour-power is identical to that of the latter. As Marx points out, inasmuch as the analysis is the necessary first step in the scientific cognition of an actual concrete, it appears as easier to deal with, and even as sufficient, *vis-à-vis* the difficulty inherent in the second phase comprising the reproduction of the concrete in thought. Yet, it is only this second phase that has the power to account for the possible apparent abstractions that could have emerged in the course of the first, analytic phase: 'It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, it is, to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of those relations. The latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one'.⁷⁴

The development of the value-form taken by the product of social labour performed privately and independently has shown us that, in the capitalist mode of production, the organisation of social production and consumption is not realised directly by consciously ruling the concrete material form taken by each individual labour. On the contrary, social labour achieves its unity indirectly, premised on the material identity of labour as human productive activity in general, that is, as labour whose materiality as the expenditure of human labour-power has not yet assumed a specific concrete form.⁷⁵ Thus, the unfolding of this form of organisation of the social labour-process cannot come to a halt without accounting for the necessary form in which it is borne in the consciousness of its subjects. Having arrived at this point, that which in the analytical stage could only be uncovered in a rather external fashion on the basis of mere repetition, is now exposed as emerging from the reproduction in thought of its own movement:

[A]rticles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labour of private individuals or groups of individuals who carry on their work independently of each other. The sum total of the labour of all these private individuals forms the aggregate labour of society. Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their

74. Marx 1965, pp. 372–3, n. 4.

75. Marx 1965, p. 67.

products, the specific social character of each producer's labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange. In other words, the labour of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers.⁷⁶

In sum, the development of the form of value does not simply consist in the exposition of the determinations of value that were already discovered through analysis. On the contrary, only such a development is able to reveal that, when organising their social labour, the mutually-independent producers cannot rely on any social relation other than their general condition as individual bearers of the capacity to expend their bodies productively, in other words, to carry out labour in general. It is incumbent on each private producer to expend this generic capacity in a determined concrete form. In other words, each of them privately exerts his or her abstract labour in the form of a determined concrete labour. If this expenditure of labour-power has materialised under a socially-useful concrete form, the corresponding abstract labour will be represented as the social attribute of its product to establish an exchange-relation with another bearer of an identical objectification of abstract labour. The materiality of socially-necessary abstract labour is represented as the value of its product, which thus acquires the specific social determination of a commodity. The material unity of privately and independently undertaken social production is established in this indirect form. The value-form taken by commodities is the general social relation indirectly established by the mutually-free producers. This is the reason why the product of their own labour confronts them as the bearer of an alien social power that dominates them.

The scope of the dialectical method in the *Grundrisse*

Let us return to the *Grundrisse*. Already in these manuscripts, Marx reveals the historical specificity of the commodity as the general social relation in a society where social labour is organised privately and independently, which determines its producers as mutually-free persons:

The dissolution of all products and activities into exchange-values presupposes the dissolution of all fixed personal (historic) relations of dependence in production, as well as the all-sided dependence of the producers on one another. Each individual's production is dependent on the production of all others; and the transformation of his product into the necessities of his own life is

76. Marx 1965, pp. 72–3. Again, Marx's direct attribution of the private character to labour, *Privatarbeiten*, becomes an attribute of the individuals in the translation.

[similarly] dependent on the consumption of all others. . . . The reciprocal and all-sided dependence of individuals who are indifferent to one another forms their social connection. This social bond is expressed in *exchange-value*, by means of which alone each individual's own activity or his product becomes an activity and a product for him; he must produce a general product – *exchange-value*, . . . The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket. . . . Each individual possesses social power in the form of a thing. Rob the thing of this social power and you must give it to persons to exercise over persons.⁷⁷

It might seem, then, that the difference in the development of the dialectical method mediating between the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* is limited to the greater wealth of detail with which the latter presents the same essential question already uncovered in the former (namely, the simplest form of the general social relation in a society of mutually-free individuals). However, as soon as we examine the path taken by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, we can see that the discovery of the determinations of value still follows an essentially analytical course. In fact, from a methodological viewpoint, the specific richness of this part of the *Grundrisse* among Marx's works lies in the fact that it gives transparency to the limits weighing on progress during the analytical phase. The argument in *Capital* overcomes these limitations in the flow of synthetic reproduction. As we shall see below, the primacy of the analytical course is reflected in the limits on the cognition of the substance of value and, hence, in the development of this substance into its necessary concrete forms.

In progressing analytically, Marx discovers in the *Grundrisse* that at stake in the determination of use-values as commodities is the organisation of the materiality of social labour. He also discovers that the unity of this materiality manifests itself indirectly through the circulation of commodities. Yet, he only comes to face the materiality of abstract labour under the external appearance of its opposite, as the total absence of all materiality:

In becoming an exchange value, a product (or activity) is not only transformed into a definite quantitative relation, a relative number . . . but it must also at the same time be transformed qualitatively, be transposed into another element, so that both commodities become magnitudes of the same kind, of the same unit, i.e., commensurable. The commodity first has to be transposed into labour time, into something qualitatively different from itself (qualitatively different (1) because it is not labour time as labour time, but materialised labour time; labour time not in the form of motion, but at rest; not in the form of the process, but of the result; (2) because it is not the objectification of labour time

77. Marx 1993, pp. 156–8.

in general, which exists only as a conception (it is only a conception of labour separated from its quality, subject merely to quantitative variations), but rather the specific result of a specific, of a naturally specified, kind of labour which differs qualitatively from other kinds), in order then to be compared as a specific amount of labour time, as a certain magnitude of labour, with other amounts of labour time, other magnitudes of labour.⁷⁸

The general social relation thus appears bereft of the simplest material content bestowed by its historical specificity. This means that Marx has not yet discovered that its movement originates in the unity of society's material capacity to undertake labour in general, in order to impose itself indirectly through the concrete material forms in which this capacity has been privately and independently exerted. Thus, its movement is presented as if it emerged from the abstractly-ideal nature assigned to its simplest specific content. With such content reduced to the condition of a mere representation, namely to an abstractly ideal construction, the development of its concrete forms by means of thought appears correspondingly inverted. Instead of responding to the fact that thought follows the real movement, it appears as if the movement of thought itself were conceptually engendering those concrete forms: 'The product becomes a commodity; the commodity becomes exchange-value; the exchange-value of the commodity is its immanent money-property; this, its money-property, separates itself from it in the form of money . . .'.⁷⁹

Marx himself subjects his development to criticism, exposing its upside-down nature: 'It will be necessary later, before this question is dropped, to correct the idealist manner of the presentation, which makes it seem as if it were merely a matter of conceptual determinations and of the dialectic of these concepts. Above all in the case of the phrase: product (or activity) becomes commodity; commodity, exchange-value; exchange-value, money.'⁸⁰

Let us leave aside any improvements in the exposition of what has already been uncovered in the *Grundrisse* to focus on the key to the qualitative leap in the dialectical development that mediates between its point of departure and that of the *Contribution*, and which would be fully completed later in *Capital*. This key lies in the discovery of the material quality of abstract labour as a generic productive expenditure of human labour-power, of the human body,

78. Marx 1993, p. 143. The difficult path taken by the reproduction of the concrete by means of thought has a noticeable expression when, in the *Contribution*, Marx discovered for the first time the materiality of abstract labour as a simple productive expenditure of the human body while, at the same time, he was not yet able to fully separate this materiality from that corresponding to the material difference between simple and complex labour (Marx 1911, p. 24).

79. Marx 1993, p. 147.

80. Marx 1993, p. 151.

of muscles, brain, and so on, which, inasmuch as it is performed privately and independently, becomes represented as the social attribute of its product. Such a discovery was made possible only by Marx's development of the form of value.

In turn, this development of the progress from the simplest determination of the commodity to its concrete forms impinges on the mode in which Marx undertakes the analysis. The latter no longer progresses from the immediate concrete to arrive at 'abstract or simple categories', as Marx still put it at the beginning of the *Grundrisse*. Instead, the analysis moves with the aim of discovering the simplest specific form of the immediate concrete. Hence: '[N]either "value" nor "exchange-value" are my subjects, but the commodity . . . [T]he simplest economic concrement'.⁸¹

Thus, the analysis does not merely move from the concrete to the abstract. More precisely, it penetrates the concrete itself until discovering the form constituting the simplest manifestation of its specific necessity. On the other hand, neither does the analysis progress by searching for the generic necessity in the apparent universal repetition of its manifestations. Hence, it can only reach the simplest concrete in its condition as a singular existence: '[T]he reader who wishes to follow me at all, must make up his mind to pass from the special [*einzelnen*] to the general [*allgemeinen*]'.⁸²

Let us now summarise the issue by returning to the way in which Nicolaus reduces the development of the dialectical method from the *Grundrisse* to *Capital* to a difference between the mode of research, in the former, and the mode of presentation, in the latter. This reading overlooks the fact that the research is in full swing, and actually in its most powerful stage (hence able to overcome all appearance), in the development of the form of value unfolded in *Capital*. Nicolaus also argues, along with Reichelt, that the research-method is clearly visible in the *Grundrisse* but deliberately concealed in *Capital*. They thus overlook the fact that Marx resorts to a mode of exposition in *Capital* that at each step reveals the unity of the two moments inherent in dialectical research. Broadly put, he starts each presentational 'node' by facing what appears to be an immediate concrete in order to proceed to analyse its necessity. Once the latter is uncovered, he follows it through in its self-realisation until the initial concrete is reproduced but now as a *known* concrete. This does not mean that no change has occurred in the dialectical presentation between the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Specifically, Marx removed from the exposition the explicit reflections on the direction that the development of the content in its necessary form should take. However, those reflections are, strictly speaking, external to the ideal reproduction of the

81. Marx 2002, pp. 230, 242.

82. Marx 1911, p. 9. In a more precise translation, *einzelnen* corresponds to the 'individual' and *allgemeinen* to the 'universal'. See Inwood 1992, p. 302.

content's self-development. In light of his interpretation, Nicolaus recommends the following reading strategy in order to 'understand' Marx's method of research: firstly, the contemporary reader should approach the *Grundrisse*, then (in line with Lenin's aphorism) Hegel's *Logic*, and finally *Capital*.⁸³ The approach put forward in this chapter leads to very different implications. Thanks to the fact that Marx had to produce the *original knowledge* that progressed from the *Logic* to the *Grundrisse* and from the latter to *Capital*, we can empower our process of *recognition* by firstly appropriating the 'anatomy' (the method) of the most developed subject, namely, *Capital*. This more developed form of the critique of political economy contains the key to the understanding of the method of the *Grundrisse*, and the more primitive one of the *Logic*.

Now, however inverted the sequence in search of the dialectical method may be presented, there will always be an abyss between the approaches just mentioned and Althusser's grotesque '*imperative recommendation*' (emphasis in the original) that *Capital's* entire first section be skipped in order to avoid the 'highly damaging' 'Hegelian influence' which would prevent an understanding of 'what must be understood'.⁸⁴

Once again concerning the point of departure . . . of working-class consciousness as revolutionary subject

We have discussed the substantive difference of form and content between the *reproduction* and the *representation* of the concrete by means of thought as methods of rational cognition. We have also seen how the *Grundrisse* are a step in the original development of the former, which only reaches the plenitude of its development in *Capital*.

However, still pending is the question of the change in the point of departure from the *Grundrisse* to the *Contribution*. We stated at the outset that the change should be traced in the very text of the former. We also claimed that in those earlier manuscripts the discovery of the determinations of the commodity as the simplest form of the general social relation in the capitalist mode of production was developed through an essentially analytical process. However, we should now add that, as Marx moves forward in the unfolding of the concrete forms taken by this general social relation, the unity of the text of the *Grundrisse* becomes increasingly determined by the stage of dialectical reproduction. This fact acquires its clearest expression at a crucial juncture much later in the text. Specifically, after unfolding the determinations of the capitalist mode of

83. Nicolaus 1993, p. 60.

84. Althusser 1971, p. 93.

production in its concrete unity, the dialectical reproduction reaches the point at which it fully uncovers capital's necessity to supersede itself in the conscious organisation of social life. The analysis is, at this point, incapable of uncovering the necessity at stake, as all that matters in the existing concrete is its immanent potentiality to affirm through its own negation as the general social relation. In the face of this, the analysis is unable to go beyond the presentation of that potentiality as deprived of its own concrete content, conceiving it under the form of a 'recipe . . . for the cook-shops of the future'.⁸⁵ In reproducing in thought the determinations of the capitalist mode of production in their unity as constituting the existing concrete, Marx makes it evident that the historical necessity of this mode of production stems from the specific form in which it radically transforms the materiality of the worker's productive activity through the socialisation of private labour:

The exchange of living labour for objectified labour – i.e. the positing of social labour in the form of the contradiction of capital and wage labour – is the ultimate development of the *value-relation* and of production resting on value . . . No longer does the worker insert a modified natural thing [*Naturgegenstand*] as middle link between the object [*Objekt*] and himself; rather, he inserts the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process, as a means between himself and inorganic nature, mastering it. He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth. . . . Capital itself is the moving contradiction . . . On the one side, then, it calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it. On the other side, it wants to use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value. Forces of production and social relations – two different sides of the development of the social individual – appear to capital as mere means, and are merely means for it to produce on its limited foundation. In fact, however, they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high.⁸⁶

85. Marx 1965, p. 17.

86. Marx 1993, pp. 704–6.

Almost immediately after thus discovering the concrete historical determination of the capitalist mode of production, Marx confronts again the commodity and its value-determinations in the *Grundrisse*. Yet, this is no longer something abstractly analytic. Following the simple note ‘this section to be brought forward’,⁸⁷ Marx begins to unfold the determinations of the commodity as the simplest concrete form of the general social relation in this mode of production. However, having barely begun this development, those earlier manuscripts break off. The body of their text has given way to what would be the 1859 *Contribution*. Nevertheless, it is the 1857–8 version of Marx’s critique of political economy that has brought to light that the development of the reproduction of the concrete by means of thought (rather than the analysis) is what determines the necessity of the point of departure.

Now, how has the starting point concretely changed? At the outset of the *Grundrisse*, Marx posited that the point of departure was ‘individuals producing in society’ while in the *Contribution* and *Capital*, this becomes ‘the commodity’. Let us take the ‘individuals producing in society’. The first step that these individuals need to make to undertake their social production consists in organising it: that is, each of them must be assigned with a useful concrete labour to be performed for others. The mode in which they unfold this organisation is but the exercise of their general social relation at the point at which each cycle of society’s life-process is set into motion. Thus, the point of departure in the study of the ‘individuals producing in society’ is that of the simplest specific form presented by their general social relationship in each historical period. What is this form in the capitalist mode of production? It is not a direct social relation between persons. Conversely, it is an indirect relation that they establish through the exchange of the products of their privately and independently-undertaken social labour as materialisations of equivalent quantities of abstract labour. In brief, that social relation is the commodity. The *Contribution* and *Capital* both begin from exactly the same point that Marx had been propounding as the necessary one until then. However, his progress in the reproduction of the concrete by means of thought allows him to recognise that this thing, the commodity, is the simplest concrete form bearing the capacity to organise social labour – and hence social consumption – in a society where individuals are free of personal dependence. The full conscious control over one’s own individual labour corresponding to its private and independent realisation entails, at the same time, the complete lack of conscious control over its social character. Hence the subordination of the human individual to the social powers objectified in the product of his or her own labour.

87. Marx 1993, p. 881.

Let us look once again at the question of method. Logical representation is not the *natural* form of scientific method. As all forms of consciousness, and hence of the human capacity to organise action, scientific method is itself a historically-determined social form. Against this form of consciousness stands the reproduction of the concrete by means of thought, also as the bearer of a historically-determined social relation. Marx developed the historical necessity of this method, ‘in its essence critical and revolutionary’, as the necessary form of consciousness in the supersession of the capitalist mode of production. Yet it subsequently fell into oblivion, nearly to the point of being forgotten altogether, or rather erased, even by Marxist scholars themselves. The aim of this text is to put the question back at the heart of the discussion of the form of working-class consciousness with the power to organise capital-transcending practice.